# Supporting Vulnerable Young People

*exploring planned mentoring relationships*

The rapidly changing policy climate has had a particular impact on the experiences of young people and their families in recent years, particularly those with the least resources (Coles 2001). Transitions to adulthood are now more diverse, bringing with them a range of risks for some groups of young people, particularly those described as 'vulnerable' or 'at risk'. While it is clear that structural issues such as poverty and the collapse of the youth labour market have had a major impact, it is also clear that young people have agency. The way in which they experience and manage their lives influences the success or otherwise of their transitions to adulthood. Mentoring has been claimed to be a useful mechanism for assisting all young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged, to utilise their agency and make the most successful transition possible to adulthood.

This study looked at young people who took part in programmes of planned mentoring. In this briefing we focus on what young people thought about the relationship with their mentors.

## Key Points

- Young people have described examples of successful mentoring as those natural relationships with an unrelated adult involving trust and reciprocity. Within such relationships they are able to accept criticism, feel that they can talk and be listened to, and exert some degree of control.

- The potential for such relationships to help young people review behaviour, develop resilience thus overcoming adverse life conditions makes them attractive as interventions for policy makers wishing to turn around the lives of very disadvantaged or vulnerable young people.

- Planned mentoring schemes reviewed in this study did work for many of the young people involved. The fact that some keyworkers were paid to 'befriend' did not preclude valuable mentoring relationships developing.

- Relationships worked best when social distance between mentor and mentored was minimised, and where the mentor had a clear understanding of the young person's familial and community networks.

- Success in a mentoring relationship was symbolised by being able to 'have a laugh' with their mentor. Good mentoring relationships were often contrasted with other relationships with adults, both professionals and family.

- When mentoring relationships ended many of the contradictions of the 'friendly' relationship became evident, and when these were poorly managed it could undermine the benefits of the intervention.

## What is mentoring?

Mentoring interventions aim to manipulate existing social networks by introducing a relationship with an unrelated adult into the young person's social world. It is assumed that the development of such an informal relationship can supplement existing parental support or compensate for the absence of existing adequate adult guidance (Rhodes 1992). Claims have been made that this form of intervention may help re-integrate disaffected young people into the mainstream.

The rationale for the power of mentoring to achieve these ends lies largely in the concept of resilience. Resilience studies draw attention to the importance of a long term care-giver assisting young people through the processes of transition to adulthood, (Werner 1990) providing a set of 'steeling mechanisms' for dealing with difficult situations (Rutter 1995).

Planned mentoring has become a major element of UK government policy directed towards vulnerable young people and their families. Mentoring programmes have proliferated across the country, with many targeting vulnerable groups. (Philip et al 2004).

However, gaps in our knowledge about the theoretical base for such work, and questions about the aims, methods and effectiveness of the concept, have become evident. Many UK mentoring schemes have largely neglected new understandings of the diversity of youth lifestyles and family formations. Overall many programmes start with a 'deficit' model, implying that young people and their families fail to meet some undefined 'norm'.

Critical research has begun to examine different dimensions of mentoring and show how aspects of the process may be of value (Colley 2003; Philip and Hendry 1996). By examining mentoring in depth we hope to shed light on how young people 'do' relationships. It is also vital to be clear about 'what works' within this form of intervention. The majority of existing interventions in both the UK and the USA have produced mixed results at best.

## Study description

The research was undertaken in three settings: a befriending scheme (in which unpaid volunteers undertook mentoring roles), a supported housing project and an education project for young people excluded from school (where paid keyworkers were the mentors for young people).

In the befriending project the focus is on the development of a one to one informal relationship between a young person and a matched volunteer, often based around a leisure activity or a shared interest. In the education and housing projects one to one relationships between key workers and young people exist within a wider group environment, with more frequent contact between them.

This qualitative study used several methods, including analysis of existing literature and documentary evidence, participant observation and group interviews. Two rounds of individual interviews were undertaken with young people who were actively involved in mentoring relationships, and also with those who were no longer involved. Single interviews also took place with mentors, parents and key informants.

## The mentors

Many volunteer befrienders were students, professionals or older parents of grown up children. The majority lived in middle class areas, whereas most of the young people in the befriending scheme lived in public housing. The social distance this conferred made it less likely that befrienders would be regarded as confidantes.

By contrast the semi professional and professional paid workers in the housing and education projects often came from working class backgrounds, had themselves experienced family break up, and had unconventional backgrounds that they were prepared to discuss with the young people. This lent them a credibility, many young people perceived them as having survived a similar set of problems to their own. The potential to become resilient adults living 'normal' lives was a key theme.

We had not expected to find that professionals and semi professionals were generally closer to the young people than the volunteers. We had anticipated that the managerial and disciplinary aspects of paid workers' remits might make them less likely to be viewed as potential allies or advocates for their clients.

## Having a laugh

Mentoring relationships often provided a safe 'space' in which to admit to going off the rails. Sharing a joke with a mentor about a difficult issue was critical, as was the recognition of a shared sense of humour, and capacity for both partners to laugh at their own actions. The participants often drew on such examples to compare relationships with their mentors and other professionals. Having a laugh was an important component of a trusting relationship and symbolised the reciprocity that many participants prized. Lorna drew a distinction between this kind of relationship and one where she felt she was not sharing in the laugh, but where the social worker was laughing at her:

> 'Yeah you couldnae say nothing or he would laugh and go (imitates pompous laugh), 'That is quite funny.' He used to complain to me. He would say, 'Lorna, I don't think you speak to me enough.' And I would think, 'It's because you laugh at us. What do you expect?' Because he had this accent and you just couldn't speak to him about anything and I was like that' (shrugs) (Lorna, age 14, Befriending project)

## Localised and community based

In some ways, having a laugh symbolised the narrowing of the social distance between the mentor and the young person. One young woman in the education project, observed that people who had not had problems themselves were often unable to understand the complexities of her life. For her, a mentor who had been in trouble as a young person was both more likely to empathise - but also to challenge her - in an acceptable way, enabling her to drop her guard and to explore issues about her family that she felt unable to discuss with others.

Typically young people in the befriending scheme met their volunteer on a more occasional basis compared with the keyworker schemes, and so fewer connections existed between the befriending relationship and the other social networks of the young people.

## Friendship and reciprocity

Young people reporting positive mentoring relationships highlighted the importance of the mentor accepting them on their own terms. In all three projects mentoring relationships were described as embodying elements of friendship. 'Friendship' was identified by young people when mentors could admit to their own weaknesses. Sometimes mentors did this by drawing on stories about their own 'risky' pasts or used anecdotes about their lack of skills in particular area which encouraged young people to tell their stories:

> 'Most of the problems that I have got, is about myself, about things that make me greet (cry) and everything and I dinna' like to greet in front of everybody, so it is only like Susie that has seen me cry' (Natalie, age 15, Education project)

Young people could also examine how to tackle the challenges facing them and rehearse new strategies with the keyworker/befriender. Thus a young man in the education project described his relationship with his mentor as one where he had to take responsibility for his actions and reflect on them. After leaving the project he commented that his mentor would not have allowed him to run away from his problems:

> 'She would make me look at why I did it. She would make me face up to it' (William, age 15, Education project)

Questions arose for young people and mentors alike about boundary setting and the limits of such friendship, for example the opportunity to discuss personal issues without fear of these being taken further. Some were aware of professional boundaries:

> 'Well I know I can trust her..I can talk to her but I know that I can't, if you know what I am getting at. She always told me that if it was something really serious she would have to mention it' (Colin, age 15, Education project)

Mentors were more likely to call attention to the boundary setting process and to regard the friendship as a 'professional' friendship.

## Building (and maintaining) relationships

It was clear that not all relationships between key-workers/befrienders and young people became mentoring relationships. Sustaining a mentoring relationship was frequently a problematic and fragile process. For a number of young people this was only one of several relationships with different adults or professionals. Some young men and women had been involved with the caring services from an early age and held negative views about these. Mentoring relationships, however, offered the opportunity to move beyond being a 'case' or a 'problem' since it was essentially a voluntary relationship over which the young person could exert some control. This often entailed a great deal of testing out of the mentor.

Young people valued being able to sustain the mentoring relationship beyond their involvement in a project, particularly those who were excluded from other kinds of provision or whose lives did not follow a smooth pattern. Scott, for example, retained his link with his mentor. Although no longer part of the project, he felt that the 'door was open' if necessary:

> 'because I have got a good friendship with Bill, ken, and I have had a lot of support and that because I have been working with him… it will be three and a half years now, ken. And he…it's basically I have always been with Bill, ken, like so, because I started off working with him and then it was into (the education project) and … he used to pick me up the first few weeks and then I got into a routine of going myself and then it started gradually going down…' (Scott, age 16, Education project)

Continuity of contact was important to these young people; managing this demanded careful planning on the part of the mentors. Mentoring programmes, especially those tied to employment training, often neglect the process of ending the relationships. Abrupt or insensitive closure of the mentoring relationship could serve to undermine the benefits of the intervention reinforcing feelings of rejection.

## Conclusions

Research on natural mentoring processes (Philip and Hendry 1996) demonstrated that young people valued informal relationships with unrelated adults when these included elements of reciprocity, control, trust, friendship and negotiation. Such relationships were viewed by participants as helping them to reflect on the challenges that they faced in new ways.

Where these natural structures are translated into planned mentoring programmes any potential gains

can be quickly lost by imposing 'coercive' structures and agendas on such relationships, distorting the experiences of both mentors and young people. (Colley 1993)

In this briefing we focused on young people's interpretations of planned mentoring relationships drawing attention to key elements of the process of building (and concluding) mentoring relationships. Planned mentoring also works best when there is due regard for the young person's perspective, where social distance is minimal, and the development of a sensitive informal relationship in which 'having a laugh' is symbolic of the degree of reciprocity that can develop.

Clearly mentoring cannot remedy all the ills facing vulnerable young people but it can be a useful element within a range of interventions.

## Implications for policy and practice

- The fact that keyworkers are paid to mentor vulnerable young people does not necessarily rule out the development of valuable relationships
- Localised interventions using keyworkers with close familiarity with the lives of vulnerable young people diminishes the social distance between mentor and mentored
- Boundaries to these planned friendships can be difficult to negotiate, but professional restrictions do not necessarily undermine their value to the young person
- Sustaining and sensitively handling the ending of such professional friendships is as important as their beginning. This perhaps challenges many short term policy approaches to work with vulnerable young people

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